

With Michelle Obama's Visit, University of California Merced Gets Its Day

By Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi

Nothing has ever come easy to the University of California Merced and that makes this Saturday's commencement of the first four year graduating class a profound moment for the San Joaquin Valley.

When First Lady Michelle Obama honors the class of 2009 by delivering the commencement speech, it will no doubt be time to take stock of how far this area has moved forward to educate its children. I will be there to applaud the graduates and the often ignored but always tenacious Central Valley community.

UC Merced is now a 2,700-student campus. It has breathed new life and vitality into the San Joaquin Valley and given thousands of high school students a sense of purpose. This first graduating class will showcase how the Merced campus will continue to embrace San Joaquin Valley students and others who might not otherwise attend a UC campus.

For many years, the planning of the UC Merced campus has also given me a sense of purpose, because the Central Valley is my foundation and plays a significant role in the Golden State. I became a founding member and chairman of the UC Merced Foundation Board, because I knew the importance of having a campus in the Central Valley for the state. There were countless obstacles to get the campus up and running from fundraising to environmental regulations. There will other roadblocks in the future as the newest UC campus grows. But the campus will prevail, because UC Merced has gumption and drive. That is why First Lady Obama is speaking at the graduation ceremony.

I cannot overemphasize how important UC Merced is to the Central Valley. Economic and cultural lightning struck when the campus opened its doors. The resources of a world-class educational system located in Merced will help stimulate both the economic and cultural status of the region and the state.

There is nowhere but up for the UC Merced class of 2009 and the San Joaquin Valley. My hat is off to the graduates, their parents and the community.